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ABSTRACT

Polite statements in conversations between men and women are analyzed as rational strategies designed to save face. Previous research has established that saving face is composed of two needs: the need to be unimpeded in conversation (negative politeness) and the need to be approved of (positive politeness). Face-threatening acts (interruptions, ignoring selection of other speakers, etc.) can be diminished by politeness strategies: hedges, minimal responses, indirect constructions, and tag-questions. Six informal conversations between men and women who were friends were recorded to provide 60 minutes of conversation. Selected portions of the tape were transcribed and divided into conversational transactions which were qualitatively interpreted. On all occasions the number of face-threatening acts made by women was not much smaller than those made by men. In conversations in which men were in the majority, women appeared to make more face-threatening acts than men. Women undertook more impeding acts such as suggestions, offers, promises, and reminders, while men made more threats as expressions of disapproval, criticism, non-cooperation, or disagreement. Women more often employed politeness strategies to minimize a face-threatening act and to show interest and approval than men.
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POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE INTERACTION
OF WOMEN AND MEN

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POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE INTERACTION OF WOMEN AND MEN

In this lecture I will give an account of an empirical investigation that was carried out by a research-team to which I belonged.

Research goal. We made researches into the interaction of women and men. We examined the use of politeness strategies for the purpose of finding a relation between used politeness strategies and sex.

Assumptions. On the basis of our analysis of social developments -developments of which the current position of women and men is the result- we assume that men have more power in society than women. Our second assumption is that language is to be regarded as an influential means in organizing our social relationships, and that, at the same time, the use of language reflects this organization in interaction.

Hypothesis. It can be deducted from these assumptions that there is asymmetrical conversation between women and men. In terms of Brown's and Levinson's theory (Brown and Levinson, 1975) -which we used for analyzing our material- we formulated the following hypothesis: the interaction of women is more directed to maintenance of face than the interaction of men.

Before I go into the investigation we carried out and the analysis model, which was in principle developed for the study, I will first make some preliminary remarks about the complicated relations that are present with respect to the phenomena of conversation, power, and difference in sex.

After that I will give a short exposition of Brown's and Levinson's theory as far as it is relevant in the context of our investigation. Finally, I will report on the general idea of the investigation as well as the outcome.

I.

To have power stands for having means to interfere and take decisions. Power is the degree to which one person can impose her or his own plans and her or his own self-evaluation of the other. Possible powergiving factors in our society are status, knowledge, age, money and -as we will prove- related or not related to this factors: sex. From all the factors power can be derived, if there is a difference in power and if the participants in question acknowledge this difference. Power is a relative conception and must as such be made operational as each case arises. It can be said that in our society, which is to a great extent based on men-developed norms, values, and myths, the factors of knowledge, status, and money are coupled to maleness. The fact that this coupling is regarded as self-evident adds the factor of sex to the possible powergiving factors. Thus maleness has become a determinant of power, in our society.

If -proceeding on the assumption that language reflects the organization of our social relationships- we want to gain an insight into the powergiving factors at work during conversation, by means of analyzing the conversation, there are a number of standards that deserve special attention. Several -mainly American - scholars interested in the subject of language and the sexes have investigated the

power relations in conversation between women and men with the help of one or more of the following standards: interruptions, overlaps, hedges, minimal responses, indirect constructions, tag-questions, length and number of turns, and the influence on the subject of conversation. In most cases it appeared that men took more and longer turns, that men interrupted more than women, and made more overlaps, that men had more influence on the subject of conversation, and that men produced fewer hedges, minimal responses, indirect constructions, and **fewer** tag-questions. (Eakins and Eakins, 1978; Thorne and Henley, 1975) These aspects are related to the speaker's attitude towards the addressee, and to her or his access to power.

One could make a number of general remarks about these investigations as far as the method used. In the investigations the standards are mostly quantitatively handled. In conversation analysis it is not only necessary to examine how many turns, interruptions, etc. a person produces, but also how the participants react to that.

Launching new topics for conversation, for example, may be regarded as showing initiative, but if the other participants repeatedly do not go into it, it cannot be said that the contribution of the participant in question is respected. Her or his contribution to the conversation is to be neglected in spite of the great number of turns claimed. On the other hand, someone who claims few turns, but who is often referred to by other participants cannot simply be denied to have great influence on the conversation, in spite of her or his seemingly poor contribution.

These are data that are lost in the quantitative analysis. Quantitative data are no doubt important. In general they

tell us something about (social) structures. Qualitative analysis, however, is necessary in order to be able to say something about the effects of these structures upon the individuals who live within these structures.

In order to lay bare the power relations at work in conversation it is of great importance to use a qualitative method of conversational analysis. This method is more precise with respect to the features of the matter under investigation -which are on the whole neglected by the quantitative method-; these features include subjectivity, development, change, and complexity. The qualitative method has, therefore, more profundity. (Maschewsky, 1978)

Qualitative researchers are often reproached for their relatively greater inaccuracy and their subjectivity.

As to the relatively greater inaccuracy, we would like to point at the difference in function of the two types of research in connection with the micro- and macrostructures, to which the investigation is related. The researcher's partiality and his conformity to norms is, provided that it has been made explicit, a clearly traceable approach.

Nevertheless, the situation is such that there are as yet no distinct methodological norms with regard to qualitative analysis.

For the qualitative conversational analysis, which were drawn up for our research, we made use of the theoretical framework as developed by Brown and Levinson in their paper "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena" (1975). In Brown's and Levinson's construction we have found a model in which we can place our observations on conversation between the sexes without merely concentrating on just one or two linguistic phenomena.

2.

In their investigation Brown and Levinson argue that politeness forms are best understood not as simply the product of culturally arbitrary norms, but as rational strategies designed to preserve face. With rationality they mean the availability of a model person of a precisely mode of reasoning.

Face is the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for her- or himself. This face is composed of two wants: the want to be unimpeded (so-called negative politeness), and the want to be approved of (so-called positive politeness). Face is something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction, for certain communicative intentions intrinsically threaten the face wants of the speaker and/or of the addressee.

The weight of such a face threatening act (FTA) is assessed in terms of the participants' social relationship and the imposition of the act. The conversational organizations (discovered by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) are sensitive to violation. Turn-taking violations (such as interruptions, ignoring selection of other speakers, not responding to prior turns) are all FTA's in themselves. In several ways threats can be diminished by so-called politeness strategies which maintain the positive and negative face in a certain way. Hedges, minimal responses, indirect constructions, and tag-questions are all to be translated in terms of politeness strategies. Politeness strategies are used by speakers in order to comply with the face wants of the addressee.

About the differences between women and men with respect to using politeness strategies Brown and Levinson say (Brown

and Levinson, 1975:256-258) that for women there is in general a pattern of high negative politeness and one of high positive politeness. This is to be attributed to women's sharp dichotomizing of their social world into two categories of people, women and men, each of which requiring different politeness strategies. For men, on the other hand, the social world is less sharply divided; men treat everyone regardless of sex relatively bald on record, unless great social distance or a verbal act with a high imposition forces them, in particular circumstances, to choose a higher strategy. Thus, women are more polite (in the sense of respecting the other person's face) than men, in this society, according to Brown's and Levinson's findings. They explain this state of affairs as a result of the dependant position women take up with respect to men.

3.

In our investigation the interaction of women and men was examined, while powergiving factors had been reduced as far as possible. We recorded six informal conversations -table talks- between women and men who were friends. In natural interactions with friends speakers mostly exhibit their 'normal' language behaviour (Dittmar, 1978:258). Moreover, in a group the possibly hindering effect of a taperecorder can be as good as eliminated.

The tapes amount to some 60 minutes of conversation, from which we arbitrarily took ten minutes. Thus, we aimed at minimizing the influence of the tape recorder and avoiding 'coming and going' rituals.

The participants were all students in the age of 25 to 30. Per conversation there were three or four participants. We recorded two conversations between two women and two men, two conversations between two women and one man.

and, two conversations between two men and one woman. Materially, there were no power- or dependence relations between the participants. The character of an informal conversation involved the relatively lesser importance of knowledge in such a conversation. The participants belonged to the same age-group and had the same social status. On the surface powergiving factors may be said to have been eliminated.

In this way we expected to be able to find a correlation between the power relations that were to emerge and the participant's sex. We supposed that maleness had become a determinant of power. In conversation this was to become visible through the way in which the participants handle FTA's and politeness strategies.

The analysis. We transcribed the selected part of the tapes. Our method of transcription was related to the score model (Ehlich and Rehbein, 1976). We divided the transcription into transactions (successions of utterances that can be grouped around a conversation subject (Coulthard, 1977)), and per transaction we looked at the number and the length of the turns, which was clearly visible now just like the overlaps and the interruptions. These data were entered in tables. Next we examined each separate turn thoroughly: who took the turn, what was said, and what was the function of the utterance in the context of the conversation. In other words, we handled our material in a qualitative manner. In this way we could find the FTA's and the politeness strategies. We examined each transaction, and after analyzing the whole transcription we could draw our conclusions as to what extent politeness in verbal interaction is a distinctive quality of either the male or female sex.

The results¹ of our investigation did not come up to our initial expectation that men would make more FTA's than women. On all occasions the number of FTA's made by women was not (much) smaller than the number of FTA's made by men. Particularly in those conversations in which men were in the majority women appeared to make more FTA's than men. This may be a matter of over-compensation, or resistance. Women did, however, appear to make different FTA's than men: women made more NFTA's, whereas men made more PFTA's. This means that on the whole, the women in our experiments observed less distance and undertook comparatively more impeding acts, such as suggestions, offers, promises, reminders, etc. The men in our experiments, on the other hand, took less account of the positive face wants of the addressee who deserved approval. They also made more threats as expressions of disapproval, criticism, non-cooperation, or disagreement. Besides, women directed more FTA's to other women than to men. This is not so in those cases where a woman had a relationship with a man. For, then, many FTA's were made to and fro.

A second initial expectation did come true, viz. that women would direct themselves more to the interlocutor than men -which will become manifest in conversation by the regular use of politeness strategies. Women more often employed politeness strategies to minimize an FTA made and to show interest and approval anyhow. Furthermore, women displayed this kind of behaviour more strongly with regard to men than to women.

Men more often choosed the bald-on record strategy (doing a FTA without minimizing the threat at all). Women rarely used this strategy. Possibly women think they cannot afford to do so.

NOTE:

I. Our investigation ought to be seen as a preliminary investigation, the findings of which should be elaborated and specified in a continuative study. Apart from the differences between the male and the female participants, which are mentioned in the paper, we also found a number of other remarkable phenomena. It matters much, for instance, what the composition of the group of interlocutors in question is. Conversations in which four people partake pass off differently from conversations between three people.

Conversations with one female and two male participants go off differently from conversations between one male and two female participants. The mutual relationships of the interlocutors, too, can be decisive as to whether an FTA is at a given moment understood as such.

In our investigation we only recorded conversations between friends. In this kind of conversation PFTA's play a **more** important role, on the whole, than NFTA's. Negative politeness is the heart of respect behaviour, just as positive politeness is the kernel of familiar and joking behaviour (Brown and Levinson, 1975:134). In conversations between friends expressions which could formally be considered NFTA's were often not taken as such, as appears from the reactions to such remarks. PFTA's, on the other hand, were mostly experienced as such.

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